

SKEPTICANA:
TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS (1991-6)

Alexander Baron

To Mike, who, like us Revisionists, lives in hope!

To The Reader

The following collection of *skepticana* was written over a period of several years to date. They were intended for various publications, but, for various reasons, they never came to pass. The article *Why I Am A Skeptic* was written for the late (and sorely missed) *Topical BOOKS*. It would probably have been published if the magazine hadn't gone bankrupt. There are various stories behind the others, but the purpose of this short collection is not to bore the reader but to entertain him.

Alexander Baron,
Sydenham,
London.

April 9, 1996

Why I Am A Skeptic

I don't believe in many things, but two things I do believe in are the immutability of Nature and the capriciousness of human nature. (1) If a man doesn't accept the first of these axioms, it is probably because he doesn't understand the second. Ie, he doesn't realise that all human beings are habitual liars. There are no exceptions to this rule; the human being who has never told a lie has never been capable of rational thought. This is not unjustified cynicism talking, but the voice of bitter experience; in short, I've been conned, duped and taken for a sucker too many times.

I realised the truth about women when I was fifteen; the first girl I ever asked out stood me up. When I accepted her pathetic excuse of getting the time wrong and made a second date, she stood me up again! Women are proficient liars; I realised that then. Now, whenever a woman cries rape, I ask her: where are your bruises? Where are the semen stains? You're sure you didn't consent? And: hasn't this happened to you before? Callous bastard? Yes. But read the *News Of The World* thoroughly next week; on page one you'll read the lurid headline about how the vicar's seventeen year old daughter was raped by the beast of Basildon, while tucked away on page fourteen there'll be a single paragraph about the lorry driver who was acquitted because the Hampstead housewife admitted under cross-examination that she'd made it all up to exact revenge on her two-timing husband. (2)

Unfortunately, though I saw through women some nineteen years ago, I didn't see through the rest of mankind until much more recently. So, I continued to believe in ESP, telepathy, psychokinesis, alien abductions, and a lot more. After all, wasn't it all there in black and white? Weren't there two, three, a dozen, reliable witnesses? Wasn't it true that none of them had anything to gain and possibly a lot to lose by telling such tall stories? Refer to note 1 and all will be made clear.

I am a skeptic. When a man reports seeing a ghost, other writers reach for their microcassettes; I reach for a breathalyser. When a *spoon-bender* distorts a piece of metal or starts a broken watch, others dig out their cameras; I dig out a conjurer who can perform the same trick. When a *survivor* claims to have

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

lost 77 members of his family in the *Holocaust*, others reach for their handkerchiefs; I ask him: where are the ashes? (3)

Skeptics are not popular, just efficient; skeptical books are not (generally) bestsellers, just thoroughly, painstakingly researched and irrefutably documented. I am a skeptic; I review skeptical books, and I review them skeptically. You don't have to like either me or them; you don't even have to read them, I couldn't give a toss, but if you don't, then don't come crying to me when one day thirty, forty or fifty years from now, you wake up and realise that your entire matrix of beliefs has been built on sand.

The ultimate skeptics are policemen; most people don't like them either, but honestly, wouldn't you rather we had skeptical detectives than nice ones? They'd never catch any criminals at all if they took every suspect at face value - and then you'd like them even less!

I am a skeptic; I am not a nice person, I don't tell you what you want to hear, only what I think you should know; if you want to read nice books by nice people, I suggest you start with *The Doris Stokes Compendium*, not James Randi's *The Truth About Uri Geller*. The late Mrs Stokes will smile benignly, take your money and feed you all the *chutzpah* you can swallow about how she solved a murder in Lancashire, found a lost child in the United States, and how it's all milk and honey on the other side. The books I review will tear down all this rosy fabric and replace it with a grey, foreboding curtain of uncertainty and self-doubt. I know which of us you'd rather believe, but which of us do you really think is telling the truth? Let me put it another way: would I lie to you?

Treat or Trick?

On the evening of October 31, 1991, (Halloween), for the first time in my life I attended a "sitting", at the Spiritualist Association's London headquarters. I arrived very early, shortly after six for seven o'clock, bought a ticket and a copy of *Psychic News*, and went downstairs for a coffee to kill time. Tickets are usually two pounds, but tonight's was a double sitting, featuring the undoubted talents of "psychic artist" Coral Polge and her helper and fellow psychic/medium, Bill Landis. Mrs Polge is certainly a talented artist, at least that is the verdict of a thirty-five year old whose most earnest attempts to draw portraits resemble those of a four year old's matchstick men. Whether or not you think she is a talented spirit medium depends on how gullible you are; I'm not that gullible any more, in fact, I never was.

The show (for that was what it was) started at just after 7pm. An old biddy who looked ancient enough to have sailed on Noah's Ark collected the tickets and introduced the two sitters, then, after they had introduced themselves, our two mediums led the audience in prayer, (oh boy). It was the usual crap about seeking spiritual enlightenment.

About seventy people were present, the overwhelming majority of them women, but most of them were not, I'm happy to say, over seventy. Indeed, there were several young and extremely attractive females present. (I'll certainly go again; maybe I'll even become a medium!)

Before she kicked off, Mrs Polge warned that sometimes it's not only close relatives and friends who come through, it can be in-laws, neighbours, and, presumably, friends of neighbours' in-laws. Also, grannies sometimes choose to come back as teenagers. The first spirit to come through, Joan, when she manifested through Mr Landis, went one better than that. She brought her cat with her!

Joan had a bit of a conversation with him, but Mrs Polge's drawing didn't ring any bells with any members of the audience, and the generalities grew more and more vague.

The drawing of a young man (who had apparently passed on recently), was said to have a lot of acquaintances on this Earth, which is hardly surprising. Then there was an old man named Jack. A connection was made here with a

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

young man in the audience, but he rejected the idea that a birthday was coming up soon. Mr Landis then suggested again that the birthday was very soon...in December. I suppose that on October 31st, December can be interpreted as very soon, but whose birthday it was meant to be was not specified, and in any case, there was still no hit.

An old lady with a hat (yes, they wear hats in the spirit world) didn't resemble anyone recently departed, but, without wishing to sound in any way facetious, I though she looked remarkably like Lech Walesa. The way Mrs Polge shaded the woman's face gave the impression that she had a moustache, but no one else seemed to notice that, or any other resemblance, though one young girl in the audience couldn't be sure.

The sitting lasted just over an hour, and though Mrs Polge's drawings were very artistic, and could undoubtedly have been real people, deceased or extant, the performance was totally unconvincing. Except for one young man for whom one of the ectoplasmic visitors was a direct hit. The accuracy of the information given him by Mr Landis was uncanny. In fact, for me it was a bit *too* accurate and a bit *too* convincing.

The drawing concerned was of a young man who the young man in the audience had apparently worked with on a ship, where they both wore blue uniforms. He seemed very enthusiastic and agreed emphatically with most of the nonsense that Mr Landis trotted out. This rang a bell, and when I got home I referred immediately to *James Randi: Psychic Investigator*; I had been sent a review copy of this excellent book by the publisher prior to the screening of the TV series on which it is based. Sure enough, although Mrs Polge had worked with another assistant on the Randi show, a man named Stephen O'Brien, the skeptical (and cynical) Randi and his team had identified a similar respondent as "a professional spirit medium". I am sure that I will recognise the young man at the sitting I attended if I ever see him again, and I won't be too surprised if it is at a sitting hosted by either Mrs Polge or Mr Landis. (4)

Your Future In The Stars: How The Mystery Of The Tarot Became One Man's Horror Scope

Newspaper advertisements must be legal, decent, honest and truthful; this is a statutory requirement, and to make sure that they are, a statutory body, the *Advertising Standards Authority* was set up to police the industry. The *ASA* publishes a monthly report which details hundreds of cases of misleading advertisements, from minor inaccuracies and omissions to outright rip offs, and its "honours list" runs the gamut from multi-national household names to obsequious sole traders. But even if an advertisement is legal, decent, honest and truthful, however well-established the company, and however prestigious the publication the ad appears in, parting with a considerable sum of money can be a daunting experience. This is the nightmare story of a man who shelled out seventeen hundred pounds for a worthless distributorship which was advertised in the national press. Let it be a cautionary tale for anyone who is thinking about taking out either a distributorship or a franchise.

Steve is in his early thirties, and although he doesn't want to be named (for both legal and personal reasons) his testimony is well documented and the author has satisfied himself that he has given a truthful account.

In 1990, after a prolonged illness, Steve found himself a rather unusual job. His employment was lucrative but of limited duration, and as well as travelling up and down the country, he managed to save (what for him was) quite a lot of money. Having been foolish in the past, squandering his hard-earned cash in the betting shop and the like, he had learned his lesson and decided to invest his trouville for the future. After putting some into the stock market and index-linked certificates, he started looking around for a small franchise, but soon realised that even the most modest franchise demanded both more capital investment and time than he could commit. So, while scanning the national press, his attention was drawn to a series of advertisements offering distributorships which involved low start up costs and full product support.

He made several enquiries, and was, he thought, shrewd in rejecting most of them outright. One company was offering a distributorship selling reading

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

glasses; this was a new idea which surfaced after the government abolished the opticians' monopoly. Steve considered this distributorship but quickly rejected it. The deal was that the company would supply the distributor with so many sets of reading glasses, which would be placed in retail outlets, complete with stands, and the distributor would regularly replenish the stands and collect the money from the shops, mostly chemists. Similar deals were offered by companies which had sprung up (apparently) out of nowhere; their product lines included compact discs, vending machines, security equipment and personalised photographs.

Steve rejected the reading glasses idea because of the one-off nature of the transaction. He figured that in any town there would only be a very small number of people who wanted to buy glasses, an even smaller number who wanted to buy reading glasses, and that between opticians and other distributors of glasses, the market would quickly become saturated. Another distributorship he looked at and quickly rejected was vending machines. Apart from their notorious unreliability, which he had witnessed on numerous occasions, and their susceptibility to vandalism, he didn't think chocolate or drink machines would provide sufficient return for the investment, even if sighted in extremely busy public places, while chip dispensers would require too much attention and would be too vulnerable to malfunctioning.

What of compact disks then? This was something he seriously considered, but with the market just opening up, it would soon become saturated; CD prices were already beginning to fall dramatically. Of those he seriously considered, one involved personalised photographs, another astrology.

After enquiring about the photography distributorship, he decided against it, as it required a minimum investment of £5,000 and even if he could have afforded to commit that sort of money, he had a hunch that the business would turn out to be a poor investment. A while later he received a telephone call from a gentleman who asked him what he thought of the scheme and if he would be taking it up. When Steve said he would not, the caller replied, "It's only five grand; it's not a lot." !! He also contacted the CD company to tell them that although it sounded an interesting proposition, he couldn't afford the seven thousand pounds start up capital required. When the man he spoke to said it might be possible for him to purchase half a unit to begin with, ie to invest three thousand five hundred, Steve was sorely tempted, but decided that although he could just about afford it, that was still too much money for him

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

to invest in a business bearing in mind that he was getting a guaranteed (and safe) return from National Savings.

The most promising advertisement he saw concerned astrology. No details were given, but the distributorship was described as ideal for a married couple. Steve had made two business trips to Blackpool the previous October, and had seen what he took to be a the same or a similar scheme: a computer printing out horoscopes. When at last he managed to book an appointment, and the company rep called at his home, he found out that it was an entirely different scheme, and one that sounded like a real moneyspinner.

The company which owned the product was called *Tarotscope Ltd*, while distributorships for the company were being sold by *B.A.M. Marketing*. The rep explained to Steve that B.A.M. developed new products for the retail market, and that *tarotscope* was the first of many.

The deal was simple. Steve was shown the *tarotscope* prediction cards, which would be placed in retail outlets: newsagents, corner shops, off licences...displayed prominently in a stand. There was to be an advertising campaign and a special promotion for retailers. Shoppers, who were buying newspapers, cigarettes, drink etc., would spot them and purchase them on impulse, but, at 99p they were repeat business.

All the retailer had to do was sign an agreement, display the product prominently, and, when the distributor called, give him 59p for every card sold. All the distributor had to do was visit his customers every few weeks and collect the money. The breakdown was as follows:-

99p retail price of which:
40p was retained by the retailer
30p by the company
29p by the distributor

The cost of the distributorship was £1,700, but there was a one-day discount of £300. Steve had heard this spiel before in connection with timeshare so was not particularly impressed. However, he was impressed with the product, primarily because astrology has been around for thousands of years, learned men have been skeptical of it for just as long, it has been repeatedly exposed by scholarly works as quackery, yet still it sells. There are horoscopes in many newspapers and magazines, magazines devoted to the horoscope and predic-

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

tion business and a vast subculture of astrological and *New Age* literature and artifacts. When the rep told him that the company guaranteed to buy back any unsold stock after a year, hardened skeptic and disbeliever that he was, he was convinced.

The other thing which impressed him was that the rep did not present the product as a get-rich-quick scheme. Rather he claimed that this was the sort of business which could be started with a modest capital outlay and which could be built up by the distributor over a period of months. If, as the rep claimed, the company was also developing new products which could be marketed through the same retail outlets, then perhaps by investing a further three or four thousand pounds over a period of time, Steve would be able to build up a nice little part-time business. It all sounded good in theory, but he had no intention of being rushed into anything, shrewd cookie that (he thought) he was, so he politely declined the rep's invitation to sign up there and then.

The rep went away probably thinking that he'd lost a sale and a good commission, but, not long into the New Year, Steve sent in a deposit for five hundred pounds, followed by a final payment of twelve hundred pounds, and shortly afterwards, his stock arrived. Then he received a phone call from the company's agent to arrange for the canvasser to call. The only thing that had bothered Steve was placing the stock with retail outlets; having once had a commission only job selling, or attempting to sell a savings account, he realised that, however good the product, to market it successfully required an extrovert personality, a certain mentality and the gift of the gab. He was humble enough to realise that this was a combination that he did not possess.

So, in due course, the canvasser called and loaded his stock into the boot of her car. In all she took the invoice book, posters, 30 card holders and 30 packets of *tarotscope* cards. Let Steve take up the story from here:

"The following day, or thereabouts, I went down the road to buy a newspaper, and sitting on the paper shop counter was a *tarotscope* holder full of cards. I remember thinking to myself, 'She must be good', and remarked this to the agent, when I spoke to him on the phone. He told me that she had succeeded in placing about half of the thirty card holders in retail outlets and that the rest would be placed in due course; he, the agent, would send me the invoice book and, in the unlikely event of her not being able to place any of the remainder in shops, he would arrange for this to be returned to me also. Not being in any great hurry, and having other things to do, I wasn't too concerned

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

when I didn't hear from him again, but after about a month, I phoned him, and this is where the trouble all started.

"The first thing he said to me was, 'Haven't you heard? The company's gone bust!'

I felt my heart sink, and he explained to me that the parent company had gone down 'for half a million.'

My immediate concern was that I had lost my investment, but he assured me that half my stock had been placed in outlets and that he had the rest at his house. As to losing money, he had lost money because the company had not paid him, but I wouldn't lose anything. In fact, as I still had the stock and the company no longer existed, I would not have to pay them any commission, fees, etc. So, when I called on my customers, instead of collecting 59p and forwarding 30p of this to the company, it would all go into my own pocket.

"The agent also told me that another distributor had expressed an interest in buying the company. When I asked him if he could put me in touch with this person he replied that he could not, but told me that I should contact the liquidator for further information. I decided to leave in there for the moment. The agent told me that he would return the rest of my stock within the next week or so, and the receipts for the stock that had already been placed. I was a little annoyed that he had not bothered to contact me to tell me that the company had gone into liquidation, but figured that he'd had more pressing matters on his mind at that time. I commiserated with him, hung up and waited for him to return my stock.

"After about a week, when it hadn't arrived, I phoned him again. He told me that it he would attend to the matter in due course but that as the stock was rather bulky, it could not be sent by ordinary post. Collecting it was out of the question because he was based in Newbury while I live in South East London. I asked him if in the meantime he could return the receipts. He agreed, and a few days later I received through the post a second class envelope containing a wad of yellow slips. As it had now been a full two months since the *tarotscope* cards had been placed in these outlets, I looked forward to meeting my customers and making my first collection. I set off with the invoices, an *A-Z* and a bagful of cards to replenish the holders. This was when the truth began to dawn on me.

"One of the first places I called on was a pub where the barmaid, who was obviously none too bright, seemed not to know what I was talking about. I was

asked to call back later when the manager would be about, which I did. It transpired that the packet of cards had not been opened. I was told there had been 'some trouble with the brewery.' The barmaid dumped the cards on the bar in front of me, then turned her attentions to her next customer. Undeterred, I began calling on shops. Before I'd purchased the distributorship, I'd figured that if on average every outlet sold only one card per day, which was surely not too much to expect, I would be onto a nice little earner. The reality was that one shop actually sold eight cards, the rest sold only one or two, if any. The reason why, soon became apparent. Canvassers are paid on commission."

As he went from outlet to outlet, Steve found that most of the shopkeepers had not had the product explained to them, they had not exhibited the card holders properly, indeed, in most cases they hadn't even opened the packets. At one outlet, a public house, on which the canvasser had literally dumped two sets of cards, he was told that the manager had explained that he was not interested in the cards, but that the woman had left them anyway saying that someone would be round soon to explain about them. Several shops, including this public house, had actually lost or mislaid the card holders. Steve was extremely angry, but realised that there was no point his being angry with the retailers, who had been the unwitting victims of a high pressure saleswoman.

The dirty tricks this woman had perpetrated in order to earn her commission were highlighted by another curious fact. A lot of the shopkeepers had the same surname, Patel. True, Patel is the Indian equivalent of Smith, and there are a lot of Indian shopkeepers in Greater London, but they aren't all called Patel. Obviously the woman had called on a shop and told the owner:

I was told you might be interested in this product by your cousin in Norwood...blah, blah, blah...and, after she had fobbed off the stock onto one poor sap: ...by the way, doesn't your brother manage a newsagents in Peckham? Oh, it's your other cousin in Forest Hill is it? And what's his address?

Actually, none of the shopkeepers had lost anything, Steve was the only victim, the mug who had spent hours trekking round these shops only to find that there was nothing worth collecting. But there was even worse to come.

He still had not received his outstanding stock from the agent, so contacted him again and again. Every time he spoke to the man, he was courteous and apologised for not forwarding the stock, claiming either that it was too heavy to post or that he would have to arrange transport. It was only in retrospect that Steve realised that the man had been hinting that he, Steve, should foot

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

the bill for its return himself, but not being the sort of person who is readily susceptible to hints, and, as it was clearly not his responsibility, he did not think of this anyway. Eventually, with his patience running out, he phoned the agent one day to be told "It's gone." Relieved, Steve thanked him, commiserated again, and decided to wait until he had received this outstanding stock before deciding what to do next. He had a long wait.

After another three weeks had elapsed, he phoned the agent again and told him he hadn't yet received the parcel. The agent freely admitted that he hadn't posted it. Why did you lie to me, Steve asked? The agent denied that he'd lied, but when Steve pointed out that the man had claimed previously to have dispatched the parcel, while now he was denying that he'd posted it, he claimed, that he hadn't told a lie, but "a little white fib." !! Steve was both unimpressed and unamused by this exercise in semantic gymnastics and demanded that he return the stock at once or face the consequences. When three days later the stock still hadn't been returned, Steve decided that he had no alternative but to sue the man. His first problem was that he didn't have his address, and, as he was not listed in the phone book, and as British Telecom would not give him the address listing of an ex-directory number, Steve had to set to work to find out the number by roundabout means, which eventually he did. Then he went to the County Court and, with much reluctance, issued a summons.

His prime concern was that the agent had disposed of his stock. He reasoned that after the company had gone into liquidation, the agent, being owed a lot of money (by his own account) had sold or otherwise disposed of the stock in his possession. He claimed for the full retail value of the stock plus expenses and compensation for wasting his time and potential lost earnings. In view of his subsequent realisation about the "potential" of the distributorship, this last was a little ambitious.

In due course, Steve received notification of the summons' issue and the agent's defence, which was rather weak. Steve had claimed a total of £994; the agent counterclaimed £990 for "wasting my time and unnecessary harassment." His counterclaim contained an admission that he had Steve's stock in his possession, and that if Steve wanted it, he should "organise a courier." Apart from that, there was a lot of irrelevant twaddle about his not being responsible for selling Steve his distributorship with the company.

Steve prepared his case meticulously, typing up a long statement for the court and questions to put to the defendant, then on June 19th, after getting

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

up at some unholy hour, he travelled over to Newbury, taking an express from Paddington and arriving a minute or two late. Fortunately, he noticed, there were a number of other cases due to be heard before his, though in the end this was academic because when he was called into the court room at 10.25, the other party was not present. Steve offered to wait, so sure of his case was he, but the judge told him that twenty-five minutes grace was more than enough.

As soon as he began examining the case he noted that Steve had issued the wrong kind of summons; Steve's heart missed a beat, thinking that it would be dismissed on a technicality, but the judge ruled in his favour, making an order that his stock be returned plus one hundred and seventy pounds. Steve had sued for the value of the stock plus two hundred and ninety-four pounds, so he went away reasonably satisfied. It took a month for the notification of judgement to arrive; on phoning the court he was told that there was a considerable backlog. After the passage of a further month, his stock still had not arrived, so he contacted the court again and was told that he would have to issue a warrant for delivery, which would cost him a further thirty-seven pounds. Which he did. His claim for further expenses was disallowed.

While waiting for the warrant to be served, he wrote to the defendant's wife telling her that he had sued her husband, been awarded judgement and that while he had no objection to him cutting off his own nose to spite his face, the longer this business dragged on, the more it would hurt his family too. Almost immediately he received an irate telephone call from the defendant who told him "You won't get a penny out of me. I'm bankrupt."

After some argument, during which Steve stressed how reasonable he had been and was still being, the agent again told him he would return his stock. He didn't.

Steve checked with the county court and found that the agent had tried to make himself bankrupt in March but his petition had been disallowed. Now it appeared that as soon as he had received notification of judgement against him, he had petitioned for bankruptcy again, and succeeded. Steve smelled a rat and contacted the Official Receiver in Reading, who informed him that the agent had gone bankrupt for forty-eight thousand pounds. Twenty thousand of this was secured, but the man's house was, conveniently, in his wife's name. Obviously he had been into other people for much more than Steve. Could Steve's judgement have given him the excuse he needed to be able to satisfy the court that his bankruptcy was genuine? Unfortunately or otherwise, this was

not the case because the Official Receiver advised Steve that the agent had been made bankrupt by Her Majesty's Customs & Excise, which Steve took to mean the VATman.

The warrant notice duly arrived from the bailiff and Steve found that he was required to attend. He contacted the court and informed them that this was not possible. The reason he gave was that as he lived in London and had work to do, it would not practicable for him to travel to Berkshire to supervise the collection of his stock at ten o'clock in the morning. There was another reason too, one which he didn't tell the girl who answered the phone. He felt that as well as suffering a not inconsiderable financial loss, that the added humiliation of collecting his stock in person would be too much, however much money was at stake. And he had already come to the conclusion that the stock as such was worthless or pretty near worthless.

He asked if it would not be possible for the bailiff to collect the stock and for it to be forwarded to him if he were to pay for postage and packing. He was informed that although it might be possible for the bailiff to collect the stock without him being in attendance, there was no way it could be forwarded by the court. As things happened, the bailiff decided that it would not be possible for the stock to be collected without Steve being in attendance in case there was a dispute. Even if there had been, Steve thought, what action could he take against a man who was bankrupt for £48,000 with secured creditors?

The last time he spoke to the court, he told the clerk rather sharply that he had come to the conclusion that the law was an ass and its servants were donkeys. Steve decided at the outset to do everything by the book, having learned from his own experiences (he thought) that crime doesn't pay. Apparently it did for some, like his creditor who, after three years, would have his bankruptcy order lifted and could start preying on innocent victims all over again.

That was the short end of the stick, but in retrospect, Steve realised that what he'd thought had been a well thought out decision to invest in a new and highly commercial proposition was no such thing. To begin with, although the product was gimmicky, it was hardly original. Steve's reasoning that as astrology had been around for thousands of years, it was a proven earner, was based on a fallacy. The truth was that the market was pretty well saturated, and selling fortune cards was not quite the same thing as casting a personal tarot or having one's palm read.

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

He realised also that he had done no research on the company. True, he had seen the advertisement in a national daily, but that is no proof of either the company's genuineness or its competence. Later, he asked a friend who does some work at Companies' House to look it up for him; his friend found that it had been one of those instant company jobs. The details of B.A.M. and *Tarotscope Ltd* are set out below:

B.A.M. Marketing of 7 Byrom Street, Manchester, was formed 19-10-1990 by Instant Companies Ltd and declared at 11 Ship Street, Brecon, Powys on the same date. (All requirements of 1985 Companies Act (Section 12 (3)) complied with.)

David Stewart Hodgson on behalf of Swift Incorporation registered the company then resigned as joint secretary the date of incorporation.

David Stewart Hodgson, director, signed on behalf of Swift Incorporations Ltd., 2 Baches Street, London N1 6UB.

Sales Director for B.A.M. was Barrie Fitton of "Sintra", 12 Bury Old Road, Prestwich, Manchester. To Steve, this sounded suspiciously like an accommodation address; he had once had some dealings with a publishing company which trades from Bury Old Road, Prestwich.

The same person was also listed as a director of *Tarotscope Ltd.* and Debbset Ltd.

Listed as Finance Director was Michael Martin Tansey of 76 South West Avenue, Billington, Macclesfield, Cheshire SK10 5DS.

He was also listed as a director of Debbset, *Tarotscope* and of Ideaheld Ltd. Companies' House, company number 2157701 (*Tarotscope*); company number 2559197 (B.A.M.).

There was also some reference to a company called Souvenir Trading of Switzerland, which may have been where the *tarotscope* idea was first tried. There was quite a lot more listed, but by the time he read about Instant Companies and Swift Incorporation, Steve had had more than enough.

When Steve told his accountant about his sorry experience, he told him: Why didn't you come and see me first? He told Steve that another of his clients had had a very bad experience along similar lines. This had been a company that was setting him up with a "coffee franchise", specifically, placing coffee machines in companies which the franchisee would service, maintain and hopefully make a steady profit out of. This unfortunate entrepreneur had shelled out several thousand pounds for, ostensibly, ten machines. He had never had

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

more than four installed, and when the franchisor went bust, he like Steve, was left with egg all over his face and an end product nobody wanted.

It never ceases to amaze Steve (or me) how these people get away with it, where they get the money from in the first place and how they manage to con banks, finance companies et al into giving them credit. A lot of them place advertisements in major newspapers, order expensive capital goods, run up massive print bills...put the company into liquidation, and the creditors walk away with a penny in the pound. Three or four years later they're at it again.

There is no suggestion that there was anything crooked about either B.A.M. Marketing or *Tarotscope Ltd.* Steve went into this disastrous "investment" with his eyes wide open, or thought he did, so, presumably, did a considerable number of other people. The rep who sold Steve his distributorship told him that the company owed him two thousand pounds. And the disgraceful behaviour of the company's agent can hardly be blamed on the directors. Nor can the quality of the canvassing carried out by a woman in a hurry to make a fat commission cheque. ("I hope she didn't get paid either!" said Steve). What Steve does hope by relating his tale of woe is that he will make any prospective franchisee or distributor think twice before parting with his or her money. Twice, thrice and four times. Remember that even a well-established company with an impeccable trading record and an exemplary credit rating can go bust. And no company can guarantee the honesty, integrity or even the efficiency of its employees, and even less of its agents.

Lies, Damned Lies...

These statistics are true, I swear:
I plucked them right out of the air.

Following the homosexual rape of a twenty-five year old man on the London Underground by two unidentified assailants, a spokesman for *Survivors* - a group which counsels male rape victims - claimed that, although victims are reluctant to come forward, there are up to 9,000 cases of male rape in London every year. (5) In London take note, not in Britain! This is an absolutely extraordinary claim, so extraordinary that it is worth examining in some detail.

Greater London has a population of less than nine million, which means that around four and a half million of these are males, not men, but males of all ages. Four and a half million divided by nine thousand equals five hundred, which means that on a one for one basis, one male in five hundred in London is homosexually raped every year and that one in five hundred is a homosexual rapist! Well, I'm bugged!

If one takes out of these figures those incapable of committing sodomy: boys under about the age of fourteen, the old, infirm etc., the sample from which the active male rapist population is drawn must be considerably smaller. When one adds to this the thousands of female victims *wimmin's* groups are forever telling us are raped every year in London, again the vast majority unreported, it would appear that the overwhelming majority of London's sexually active male population spends its time either bonking or bugging its neighbours. Clearly this is absurd; where do these figures come from?

The individuals and groups who make such extraordinary claims are often, though by no means all of the time, well-meaning; some of them are totally misguided - Mrs Mary Whitehouse, for example - while others have axes to grind. Whatever their politics or prejudices, one thing is for certain, the overwhelming majority of such claimants literally pluck their figures out of thin air, and the fact that very often they go unchallenged means that they are carried over into the canons of general thought and thereby become *common knowledge*, or even accepted legally.

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

When people decide, for whatever reason, to champion what they consider to be a good, worthwhile or noble cause, they are naturally concerned with winning people over and encouraging them to support their particular point of view. Most of the causes people and pressure groups support profess to have a noble purpose, if they are not noble in fact. Although anti-censorship campaigners such as Mrs Mary Whitehouse may be denigrated by Libertarians, a lot of people do find pornography offensive; certainly plastering newspapers, TV screens and even public subways with images of women with their legs spread wide open can hardly be described as good taste. And though the word 'fuck' has become almost *de rigueur* in certain circles, it is really not necessary to sprinkle films, plays, books and comics with this and other obscenities.

It is nice to watch a film which thrills, entertains or even makes people laugh without resorting to expletives, gory murder scenes or gang rapes; there is more than enough real violence, obscenity and hatred in the world without inventing more. But do the claims of the pro-censorship lobby hold water? Is it true for example that after watching a simulated rape on the big screen or a video nasty that ordinary people (men!) will be incited to commit similar offences?

Even if it is true, and an objective examination of the evidence suggests that it isn't, this is not necessarily an argument in favour of censorship. There is after all such a thing as free will. Convinced of the righteousness of their cause, the pro-censorship lobby, Mrs Whitehouse included, make extraordinary claims. The current writer once heard Mrs Whitehouse herself claim that (get this) as many as a million children worldwide may have been murdered during the course of making *snuff* films. One million? This is extraordinary in the extreme. (6)

Other "experts" have claimed that every year Satanists snatch fifty thousand people off the streets of the United States and murder them in Satanic rituals. (7) The claim has even been made that 4,000 babies are bred in Britain each year for the purpose of sacrificing them to Satan. (8) Satanic murders are an unpleasant business, indeed, all murders are unpleasant. There have been occasional, well-documented instances of murders with a Satanic connection, the most obvious being the murder of actress Sharon Tate and others by the Manson "family" in 1969, but can any intelligent person believe that the figure of fifty thousand such murders a year in the United States or four thousand

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

babies a year in Britain have any basis at all in fact? I mentioned the latter to a serving police officer, a detective. His reply was unprintable.

A TV programme, *Why Women Kill*, which was screened on BBC1 at 9.30pm on Wednesday, May 13, 1992, claimed that 3 to 4 million women in the United States are regularly physically abused by their husbands and boyfriends.

Although not as unpleasant as murder, Satanic or otherwise, neither wife-beating nor girlfriend-beating have anything to recommend them. There can be little doubt that a great many women do suffer at the hands of their husbands and lovers, but can such figures be substantiated? How are they arrived at? Are they extrapolated from particular samples? If so, how representative are these samples?

For our final example of unreliable mortality statistics, let us take a brief look at cancer. A commonly quoted statistic is that 100,000 people die prematurely in Britain every year as a direct result of cigarette smoking. (9) What does this mean, prematurely? How prematurely? One year, five years, twenty years? How are we to assess the life expectancy of the average smoker as against the average non-smoker? And does either of these creatures exist?

A report in the *Advertising Standards Authority, Monthly Report*, No 12, embargoed until 13th May, 1992, page 24, upheld a complaint against the Radon Protection Company, which had claimed in a local press advertisement that in excess of 2,100 lung cancer deaths annually in the UK were attributable to radon exposure with the most vulnerable being children.

The report found insufficient evidence to substantiate the claim. The company had since ceased trading and the source, the National Radon Consortium Limited, had gone into liquidation. These figures were quite obviously doctored for squalid commercial purposes. The message here is obvious: You need us, for the sake of your children. (10) It is a widely held misconception that all vested interest is purely financial. People are in the business of selling ideas as much as products and services. Whether it is Christian fundamentalists seeking to save their souls by saving yours, bigots spreading rumours about people they don't like, men trying to worm their way into women's knickers, or a thousand and one other things, statistics are forever being doctored, quoted out of context or brazenly invented with the express purpose of influencing the ways people think.

It is therefore vitally important that when discussing statistics we do not allow ourselves to be swayed by appeals to emotion, even when they are

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

irreproachable. For example, if you are told that a certain type of behaviour quadruples your chance of dying before the age of fifty, you might think this behaviour (smoking a certain number of cigars a day, perhaps), should be outlawed in its entirety. But what if this means a real increase in the death rate from one chance in a hundred thousand a year to four chances in a hundred thousand? It doesn't sound quite so terrifying put like that, does it?

Synchronicity Or Coincidence?

At about 6.15pm on Wednesday, July 1, 1992 in the British Library, North Library Gallery, I walked up to the desk and handed in my books. In front of me was a young French girl, Catherine Delanauld, who was taking out two slim booklets. One of them I recognised immediately: published in 1990 it is called *United Europe/Divided Britain*, and is a small collection of five essays/articles previously published and unpublished. The author and publisher of this masterpiece is one Alexander Baron.

The previous Friday I had taken a short holiday in France, returning on Monday morning. This was the first time I had been abroad for well over a decade. I didn't ask Catherine if she came from Paris but I did promise to leave her a copy of my booklet the following day.

Thursday, I arrived at the Library at about 2.20pm and went to the Advance Reservations desk where I explained I had an envelope for a young French lady who would be in later; could I leave it here with a note for when she collected her books? I needn't have bothered because after leaving the envelope (which contained not only *United Europe/Divided Britain* but a bonus *The Story of Bonnie and Clyde and other poems* which I had also published), I bumped into her on my way up to the North Library Gallery. She was returning from the photocopy room!

Two days later in my local video store, I asked the woman behind the counter if she had the film *The Runestone*. The man behind me put the cover of this film on the counter and asked her if she had two of them.

A short while later (Monday, 13th July to be precise), back in the British Library, I met a young man, again in the North Library Gallery, who was researching a very similar subject to me; like Catherine Delanauld he was standing at the issue desk, where he was handing in back issues of a magazine which does not have a very large circulation, but which I know well. On January 27, 1996, I was on my way to lunch at 1pm from the North Library when I noticed a copy of one of my own pamphlets in a return tray. It appeared to have been out to a member of staff!

I have often ordered books which have been out to other readers, books which are by no means bestsellers. Obviously one need not postulate any great

synchronicity here, nor when two people order a recently released film at the same time, but my chance encounter with Catherine Delanau was remarkable. There are some eighteen million books in the British Library; I sold barely half a dozen copies of my poorly flung together collection of essays. Other coincidences have been just as or even more remarkable. The following also happened to me in the British Library.

On a later occasion, I ordered an edition of *TRUE CRIME Detective Monthly* to read up on a murder case; this was already out, to a member of staff. There is nothing unusual about this, certainly not for a far less obscure publication than the sort of thing I churn out, but when I was told that it was out to J. Harrison - who works in the Round Reading Room - I was a little surprised to find that J. Harrison didn't know anything about it. The magazine was actually out to another J. Harrison who also works in the Round Reading Room!

For the record, the story I was interested in is also relevant to this essay. In the wake of the trial of mass murderess Rosemary West, a contributor to this magazine had unearthed a story about an earlier murder trial with an eerie similarity. [I had seen this in a newsagents at the time but didn't buy the issue]. Briefly, as most readers will know, Frederick West murdered fourteen young women - including his first wife, his step-daughter and his own daughter, then buried them. Most of his victims were buried at the West family home, 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester. On New Year's Day 1995, West committed suicide while on remand and left his wife Rosemary - a more than willing accomplice - to face the music.

The December 1995 issue of *True Crime* related the story of how, in May 1946, Harry Berrisford had been battered to death by his mother's lodger and buried under the floorboards at her home in Hanley, Staffordshire: number 6 Cromwell Street!

At the start of the eighties I used to correspond with a small press publisher who lived at 6 Athole Gardens, Glasgow. Six or seven years later, I received a call from a contributor to *Topical BOOKS*, asking me to send him a copy of a publication to his home address: 5 Athole Gardens, Glasgow!

Another, quite remarkable coincidence occurred one day when I was walking across London's Trafalgar Square. Sitting on a bench was a girl with what I might politely describe as an impressive pair of legs. Turning my head to get a second look, I attracted the attention of the man sitting on an adjacent seat. He had his wife and son with him, and, although I was wearing heavy rimmed

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

glasses (which he had never seen me wear before), he recognised me and called out my name. We had been on a training course together in Leeds a few years ago. He lived in York and was in London only for the day.

On no less than four occasions I have run into my colleague Mark Taha completely by surprise. Most recently I met him in Westminster Central Reference Library on October 25, 1995. True, this is a library which we both use not infrequently, but five months previously, I was delivering an order to Bishopsgate Institute Library. I had a number of places to visit that day, (11) and had intended to call in at this library later. Instead I went straight there, and while I was doing some ad hoc research, Taha walked in. Admittedly he does visit quite a lot of libraries in the course of his researches, but I had no idea that he would be visiting this one, and certainly not that he borrowed books from it. On another occasion I walked into the main post office at Kings Cross and he was in there cashing a cheque, and on yet another I was on my way to visit a rabbi in Stamford Hill. Although I had visited him before, I got lost and was utilising my A-Z when Taha, who also lives in Stamford Hill, came walking directly towards me.

Finally finally! three coincidences - one of them amazing - which my solicitor can vouch for. On June 19, 1995 I phoned his New Cross office and was told that he was out at a conference all day. A little later I was on my way to a snack bar at Victoria Station when who should I run into? He was on his way to a shop to have his briefcase mended. Why on Earth a man who lives the other side of Croydon and works in New Cross should patronise a repair shop in Westminster I'll never know. Three days later I was on my way to the High Court to issue a summons (12) and, coming out of Temple Underground Station, who should be sitting facing me in company with my barrister? Ted Goodman again.

Actually, this wasn't such an enormous coincidence; normally when I am going straight to the High Court I walk up from Charing Cross main line station, but today I had come by Underground. And my barrister does have chambers in the Temple - him and hundreds of others. And barristers and solicitors are often found together. All the same though, this was not a little remarkable, especially in view of the previous Monday's even more remarkable encounter. (13) And, on October 3, 1995, while I was swearing an affidavit in the Action Department at the High Court, in he walked again. I'd previously been to his office and had been told by his secretary that he was there but hadn't expected to run into him. (14)

All these coincidences are extraordinary, and this is only the testimony of one man! It may be that I have an unusual propensity for this sort of thing, this list is by no means inclusive. But at the very least there are probably tens of millions of people worldwide who experience similar and equally amazing coincidences. Such coincidences are so remarkable, it is sometimes argued, that there must be a driving force behind them, synchronicity or whatever. Is this true?

In his book *Lady Luck*, the mathematician Warren Weaver relates a fascinating anecdote. (15) Attending a dinner during World War II he remarked to his fellow diners that the probability of two of the twenty-two people present sharing the same birthday was just under 50% while if there were 23 people present the chance would be just over 50%. They found this difficult to swallow, so someone suggested they go round the table collecting birthdays. None of the guests had the same birthday, at which point the waitress interrupted saying that she was the 23rd person present and had the same birthday as "the General over there, May 17th!"

Weaver swears this anecdote is true, and I believe him. The incident with the waitress may be remarkable but the mathematics is not. If there had been only ten people in the room, the chances of two of them sharing the same birthday would have been about one in nine (11.7%). With twenty-two, the chances were 47.6%; while with 23 they were 50.7%. With fifty people in the same room, the chances of at least two of them sharing the same birthday would be 97%. (16) Although the mathematics of probability is often surprising, once it has been explained, most people accept it with a shrug of the shoulders.

This is because we can quantify very precisely the chance or chances of sitting next to someone with the same birthday, or something of that nature, but most amazing coincidences and happenstances cannot be so quantified. One of the most remarkable coincidences ever to have happened anywhere must surely be the Australian shark murder.

On April 25, 1935, a tiger shark which had recently been caught at sea and transported to an aquarium spewed up a human arm which, from a tattoo, was identified as belonging to 40 year old James Smith, (17) an ex-boxer who had been missing for two weeks. As a result of this, a man was brought to trial but was acquitted. The body had been dismembered, put in a trunk and towed out to sea, the arm wouldn't fit so was trailed on the outside. It worked loose, was swallowed by the shark, which was then caught and transported to a zoo. The

shark then contracted indigestion and vomited up the arm. If you were a murderer and were traced by such a remarkable series of events, you would undoubtedly think the Man Upstairs was making damned sure you were punished for your sins. In fact, as stated, no one was convicted of this murder.

To cap it all, I read about this case in a crime book many years ago and intended to include it in this article; I was wondering how if ever I would be able to trace it when, browsing through *The New Murderers' Who's Who* in the British Library which I had ordered in connection with an entirely unconnected matter, I opened the book at random and the story hit me in the face! (18)

Again, it is totally impossible to quantify such remarkable happenstances and coincidences as I have recounted here, but it is possible to explain them. The explanation is that we live in an ordered universe, and upon the order of nature, man superimposes his own order, an order which may at times appear capricious and totally without order, but which more often than not follows well-established patterns similar to other people's.

If you were to meet someone with the exact same name as you, you wouldn't be too surprised, though you'd be less surprised if your name were John Williams than if it were Peregrine, Reginald, Algernon, Cyril Heatherington-Smythe. In fact there are two famous musicians named John Williams: the classical composer of (among other things) the music for the film *Superman*, and the renowned classical guitarist. Doubtless there are many more. (19)

The point is, a name is not a random collection of letters; there is no one called Eretwdhtfpc Hjoulter for example. People's names do not have an infinite number of letters and there is a very finite number of names in existence. This is a case of man superimposing his order on the natural order. Even without this order upon order, coincidences abound, and we should expect them to. We should not be surprised if two people or many people often have the same ideas, especially in response to the same or similar stimuli.

Like the anecdote I was told about the man from Yorkshire who visited an American tourist attraction only to meet another man from the same county, these sorts of coincidences and happenstances are remarkable, some far more than others, but they are almost totally unquantifiable. It is impossible to classify this as a billion to one, a million to one or even a thousand to one chance. This and my encounters with the charming young Miss Delanault in the British Library.

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

Incidentally, a thousand to one happenstance or even a ten thousand to one happenstance is not that remarkable. If as you were boarding a plane you were to be greeted by a stewardess who advised you that flying was perfectly safe because there is only one crash for every ten thousand flights, would you still board?

And even with chances in the region of billions to one, as my Library encounters almost certainly were, think how many coincidences and extraordinary happenstances do not occur. It is not necessary to postulate a supernatural force at work be it synchronicity or anything else. Coincidences and extraordinary happenstances occur everyday, and it is only human nature that we should marvel at them. An even better idea is to recognise them for what they are and, where possible, to use them to our advantage. In other words, use them to make your own luck, perhaps by writing an article about them or even a novel based on them. Who knows, you may become a bestselling author by a fortuitous accident!

Ain't Life A Bitch When You're Stinking Rich?

On August 19th, 1992, the *Daily Mirror* ran a story *TORMENT OF TYCOON WHO TURNED KILLER*. This related the *sad* tale of "tragic" boss David Elton. Forty-eight year old Mr Elton, a millionaire oilman, battered his wife to death with a bottle then threw himself into the sea. Why? Because the man who eight months ago received a £1.26 million pay off had failed to find another job.

This *poor* man, who owned a meagre £275,000 house at Middleton-on-Sea and a miserable £750,000 flat in London was so depressed at the thought of signing on the dole that he decided to end it all and take his wife with him. The story appeared in other national papers too; no doubt they all commented on how tragic this case was. At the same time, the people of Bosnia were blowing each other to pieces, the people of Somalia were and are, at the time of writing, continuing to experience a terrible famine which, it has been estimated, could lead to over a million deaths.

Other human tragedies, albeit on a more modest scale include the thousands of people up and down the country who are losing their livelihoods on account of the "recession", the homeless who are still there roughing it on our streets, the not-so-modest continuing hostilities in the Gulf, and a thousand and one other tales of human misery great and small.

David Elton, who received a cash pay off of a sum of money far greater than most people have ever seen, much less owned, decided to end it all, and take his wife with him. David Elton and millions of other privileged people like him, who have never experienced hunger, despair, homelessness, have never lived in poverty...these poor rich people go through crisis after crisis; life must be imaginably tough for them. Whenever I think of them, I thank the God I know does not exist that I live by myself in a £27 a week housing association flat. And I'm sure the war victims of Bosnia, the famine victims of Somalia, the hungry, the homeless and underprivileged of Britain and the world also thank their lucky stars that they too do not have such heavy crosses to bear as poor little rich man David Elton.

Uncommon Common Sense

On the morning of July 3, 1992, I was sitting in a café at the bottom of my road. Having ordered a high fat breakfast: bacon, egg, sausage, and heavily buttered toast, the last thing on my mind was how we should be cutting out saturated fat to reduce the *scandalous* rates of coronary heart disease in this country. We are, are we not being constantly reminded by "experts", suffering from an epidemic in this country - the so-called diseases of affluence?

In the paper that same morning was the tragic story of a young boy who had cancer of the eye. He had already had one eye removed, and now, in order to save his life, the doctors were preparing to remove his other eye, which was also infected with this terrible disease. This heart-rending but horrific story didn't quite put me off my breakfast, but it did make my hands grow weak and send shudders down my spine.

Sitting at a table on the other side of the café was a youngish man with stars tattooed on his neck who was exchanging banter with the woman behind the counter. (20) It's terrible: she said. He replied that the drummer of the rock group *Kiss* had died of cancer of the heart. Can't do anything about that: he said, you can't cut that out. Yes, but it is terrible, the woman continued, a young boy like that. You've gotta die of something: said the fellow, nobody dies of TB any more, so you've gotta die of cancer or heart disease. This is the real solution to the cancer and coronary heart disease *epidemics* the Western world is said to be experiencing.

Writing in *Galileo's Revenge: Junk Science in the Courtroom*, page 139, (Basic Books, 1991), Peter W. Huber says, "In 1910, one in seven people [in the United States] died of tuberculosis, often quite young; sixty years later, one in six died of cancer, usually quite old. When you adjust for longevity and strip out the effects of tobacco, the cancer epidemic evaporates."

It is the supreme irony that an ordinary working man sitting at a table in a roadside café should solve the conundrum of the "diseases of affluence", when all the money that has been spent on research and attempting to "educate" the public to change its eating and lifestyle habits has failed miserably.

How To Accurately Predict The Outcome Of The National Lottery

Not that I gamble, you understand, but I did buy a ticket for the National Lottery this week. When I watched the draw live on December 10, 1994, the show's female compère (21) the lovely Anthea Turner, told us that Mystic Meg (the imbecile *psychic* who is contracted to make an arsehole of herself in front of twenty million viewers every week), had been spot on with her prediction of the previous week. Apparently, Meg had predicted that the winner, or one of the winners, would live in a house with a one in the number in somewhere beginning with L. The winner did in fact live in a town beginning with L and her door number was 61. Wow!

But let's take a closer look at this prediction. First, the jackpot prize wasn't actually won and was rolled over to the then current week. So Meg was wrong in one sense, unless she predicted that one of the winners would fit this description rather than *the* winner. But of course, if she extends her predictions to cover other, lesser, prize winners, then any hits she enjoys are less remarkable, since we can all make correct predictions if we make enough of them.

I can't remember if the letter L referred only to a city or town, but needless to say London alone gives her a one in seven chance since the population of Greater London - which is more of a county than a city - stands at about eight million, out of a population of some fifty-eight million. Whether or not Meg was referring only to a city or town, you can bet your last pound coin that had the winner lived in Lanarkshire, Lancashire or Leicestershire, she would have stretched a point. Actually, the winner lived in County Londonderry, which would also have given her a correct prediction if she had guessed C or D (Derry) instead. And if the winner had lived in Greater London (or Greater Manchester), she would have had two chances to predict the correct initial letter, not to mention such get outs as Brighton - which is in both Sussex and East Sussex; Leeds, which is in Yorkshire and West Yorkshire/West Riding and so on.

The most interesting feature of Meg's guess though was her choice of the number 1. Probably unknown to Anthea Turner, but definitely not unknown to Mystic Meg, is the little known fact that number one is far more likely than any

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

other number to appear in a house number. The number 1 appears in 20 numbers between 1 and 100; the other numbers appear in 19 of them. But that is not the whole story; assuming that houses are numbered sequentially, there will always be a number 1 but not always a number 9. (22)

On New Years' Eve Mystic Meg predicted that in the spring there would be a record jackpot of perhaps £30 million, while in the summer there would be controversy when a celebrity with dark hair won the lottery, although she didn't specify what prize. Well, spring has come and gone, (23) and the jackpot hasn't reached anything like £30 million yet. But she did say *perhaps*. As to dark-haired celebrities, well I have certainly got dark hair, although I'm no manner of celebrity. But if I do happen to win the lottery, I won't simply cause controversy but a national scandal. I live in hope.

What Are Miracles? And Why They Don't Happen

If someone tells you what sounds like a tall story, how can you judge whether or not that person is telling you the truth? The simple fact is that for many improbable sounding stories, you can't. For example, I once told someone I'd received a letter that day from the Heavyweight Champion of the World. He scoffed. Until I showed him a signed photograph of Larry Holmes!

Likewise, although it is improbable that you will meet a member of royalty on a particular day, or witness a bank robbery or do or see a hundred other offbeat things, who says you can't? How likely it is that you will meet the Queen, see a coach crash or win the local lottery is something which is difficult if not impossible to quantify, but improbable things happen everyday. It is extremely improbable that if a computer is programmed to pick a random number between 1 and 1,000,000 it will pick any particular number, a million to one, in fact! But clearly the fact that it does choose any particular number is not extraordinary. On the other hand, if it were to choose the same number two or three times in a row, that would be extraordinary. If that were to happen, you would suspect that it had been misprogrammed or that there was a bug in the system. But how can you decide if a miracle really happened?

A miracle is not just an extremely improbable event, like going to Jamaica on holiday and meeting your next door neighbour; a miracle is, by definition, a violation of Nature. It is by all accounts an event which should never happen. Yet people claim that miracles do happen; often they are sincere, and their claims are not always made in a religious context.

It is the sincerity (or apparent sincerity) of witnesses to alleged miraculous happenings which convinces many people that miracles do in fact happen: that the terminally sick are cured by divine intervention, that the dead are raised, or even that the Earth stands still. If an allegedly miraculous happening is witnessed by two or three or even a dozen people, as in the case of "the prophet" Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon religion, their testimony is often convincing to people untrained in philosophy. No one really likes to call anyone a

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

liar; how can one possibly accuse two, three or a dozen people of bared-faced lying? Especially if what they claim happened is utterly fantastic?

Some people believe, erroneously, that because a claim is outrageous, fantastic or impossible that it must be true. Who could invent such a proposterous thing they argue, and for no apparent motive? (24) Unfortunately, this line of reasoning demonstrates a total ignorance of the fallibility of human testimony. (25) This problem was solved more than two centuries ago by the Scottish philosopher David Hume, (1711-76).

In 1748, Hume published his famous *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, a book which is still in print today and hasn't been bettered. Here, in his essay/chapter *Of Miracles*, he argues that "...a weaker evidence can never destroy a stronger..."

The logic of this statement cannot be faulted, Hume says specifically of miracles (violations of Nature, remember), that "...no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish..."

In other words, it would have to be even more miraculous for the miracle not to happen. Is it really more likely that the dead will walk or that somebody will levitate than one, two, a dozen, or even a thousand people will lie or be deceived? You may be tempted to answer yes, many religious people do, arguing that they believe by faith alone. Fine, but faith is not science. It may be okay for religion, but it has no place in the real world.

If however, you are not a religious person, and are still inclined to answer yea to the above question, ie, you really do think it is more likely that Nature will be violated than a dozen apparently sincere people lie, ask yourself this. If it were to be alleged that a man had jumped out of a plane without a parachute, floated to the ground in defiance of the law of gravity, and walked away unscathed, how many sincere testimonies would it take to convince you that this event had actually happened? Two, ten, a thousand? And how many more would it take to convince you that you could do the same?

The Joker In The Pack

When I was a lad, (more years ago than I care to remember), I was never a great fan of DC Comics; the heroes were a bit too good to be true, especially Superman. I did read them from time to time however, and I remember particularly reading a Batman adventure in which his arch-enemy the Joker appeared to go off his rocker. I can't remember the fine details, but it is the moral of the story which is important.

The Joker would break into a warehouse and steal a wheelbarrow, then into a factory and steal a pot plant, stuff like that. Batman and Robin thought he'd gone gaga until they ran the data through a computer. It turned out that he hadn't; the petty thefts were red herrings. In the course of committing these seemingly senseless burglaries, he took photographs. The companies he burgled manufactured hi-tech equipment, that sort of thing.

The Joker may be a comic book character, but in real life, much apparently irrational or even insane behaviour has an ulterior motive or a higher purpose which is not discernible even from a detailed examination. Our senses are easily deceived by Nature, which doesn't wilfully play tricks on us. But human nature does. Human nature is not like Mother Nature; it is not immutable, human beings are often cunning, they lie with intent and with impunity, even with sincerity. Sincerity, after all, is not difficult to fake. If you don't believe that, visit your local library and take a look at some of the books published on parapsychology, the occult, UFO abductions, spirit mediumship...are all these people sincere when they claim to have taken a ride around the solar system, bent spoons by the power of thought or called up their Great Aunt Sophie at a seance?

Then too, people change their spots even if leopards don't. This is true particularly of ideology. Angry young men (of both sexes) grow up into apparatchiks; communists become democrats; and vice versa. This compounds the problem of motivation, as people's minds, motives and fads change, so do their patterns of behaviour.

Like every good detective, you should always look for a rational motive: money, lust, revenge...but don't assume it will always be there. Sometimes the Joker really does go mad, but more often his inconsistency or absurd behaviour

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

(real or apparent) is the result of emotion. And this is the really difficult part, because ultimately, all human behaviour is based on emotion, including idealism. As the only certainties in life are death and taxes, there is, in the final analysis, no rational reason for any non-believer to do anything, except to gratify his emotions, or to serve what he imagines, idealistic but erroneously, to be a higher purpose.

Welcome to the World of AIDS (and other "tall" stories)

A while ago a story hit the headlines about a man who was deliberately spreading AIDS. He was said to have infected a number of women, but the authorities were powerless to do anything about it. Macabre or even ghoulisish though this may be, the story probably has no basis in fact. Or has it? In the United States, there have been similar stories about AIDS spreaders, this time women.

One man was meant to have picked up a recently divorced woman, taken her back to his place, and, in the morning, waking up alone, found a message scrawled on his bathroom mirror:

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF AIDS!

Another man who contracted the disease was said to have spent his evenings looking for his killer, while in Sweden, one unlucky fellow found the message: **WELCOME TO THE AIDS CLUB** scrawled on his bathroom mirror. Written in Swedish, presumably.

A well substantiated report from the Deep South claims there have been at least two cases in Georgia and Texas of "rent boys" working although aware of the fact that they had contracted AIDS. This sounds more than a little plausible; of the countless millions of prostitutes (male and female) throughout the world, it is hardly improbable that many of them continue to ply their trade in the full knowledge that they are "spreading the disease".

However, the AIDS in the mirror stories sound suspiciously like urban legends. Guy de Maupassant (1850-93) wrote a story *Le Lit 29* (*Bed No 29*) about a woman who deliberately spread syphilis. Welcome to the syphilis club? and many of these canards are of an even older vintage. For example, in Mediaeval Europe, the Jewish communities were accused of poisoning the wells with the plague. However, although AIDS Mary may be a figment of some newspaperman's lurid and perverted imagination, Typhoid Mary was not.

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

Mary Mallon (born c1870) was an Irish-American cook at the turn of the century who moved around New York eluding the authorities for eight years using various pseudonyms. She caused at least 10 outbreaks totalling 51 cases and 3 deaths. She was detained for 23 years, until her death in 1938. (26)

In 1982, Swiss novelist J.F. Federspiel published *The Ballad of Typhoid Mary*, in which a fictional Typhoid Mary brought death to untold thousands!

So do all these stories have no basis in fact, except the well-documented case of Typhoid Mary? Well, not exactly: the *Nottingham Evening Post* LATE CITY FINAL edition for January 20, 1994 reported on page 7 the case of an Australian man with the AIDS virus who was charged with three counts of recklessly endangering life by having unprotected sex. And a programme screened on BBC2 on August 1, 1995 (27) reported cases of two men - one homosexual and one normal - who had wilfully infected their partners with AIDS. (28)

On November 11, 1995, a story published in the London *Times* reported *Mistress in HIV case faces jail*. This was the lurid tale of a Ugandan woman who was convicted of injecting her lover with her infected blood when he found another girlfriend! To date, David Kabagwire had not contracted the virus.

Then there was the extraordinary - and to some extent media manufactured case - of AIDS Mary and the Irish priest. This hit the headlines in September 1995. On September 12 that year, the London *Times* reported that an unnamed woman who had caught AIDS in England - to which she had then returned - was said to have deliberately infected up to eighty-five men in one Irish town, including five who had been confirmed as having HIV. The woman was denounced by a parish priest. This story was widely reported in the tabloid press and on the radio. (29)

It doesn't end there though, the priest in question - Father Michael Kennedy of Dungarvan, County Waterford, is, apparently, a fourth cousin to John F. Kennedy, the American President who was assassinated in November 1963, and is, in other ways, far from the run of the mill Irish Catholic priest. The following day, the *Times* reported that Father Kennedy had defended his claims, but that the Irish Health Minister had demanded evidence, which does not appear to have been forthcoming.

On September 14, a senior AIDS worker is said to have put the chance of a woman infecting a man on first contact from 500-1 to 1,000-1. (30) The following day it was reported that Father Kennedy had told a radio interviewer that the media had misinterpreted his remarks. He was roundly criticised by health

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

officials, and no increase in attendance at clinics had allegedly been reported, but he is said to have claimed that he had never said eighty people had gone for HIV testing. (31) It is the current writer's opinion that the well-meaning but gullible priest was led up the garden path by the woman and then hyped up by the media. How many times have we seen this sort of thing before?

Whatever the facts of the Father Kennedy fiasco, it is certainly true that this urban legend came to life, as is evinced by the other cases cited here, but another urban legend came to life in October 1994 - or a variation of one - and if it had not been so thoroughly documented, it is doubtful if anyone today with his head screwed on right would have believed it, much less an historian in two or three hundred years time.

In his book *The Mexican Pet*, the well-known American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand reports the case of the baby on the flight from Colombia which didn't move. A Federal undercover agent became suspicious and notified the customs. The baby had been dead for some time and had been stuffed with cocaine. This made the national press. The story appears to have had no basis in fact, in spite of its bizarre plausibility, (ie the depths to which some people will sink). However, a far more tragic variation of this story actually happened, as stated, in October 1994, when a British civil servant named Caroline Beale was arrested while trying to board a plane in New York. She was found to have concealed under her clothing her newborn baby. She was subsequently charged with murder.

That is extraordinary enough, but the - obviously - mentally disturbed Beale had been on holiday with a group of people in New York, including her lover (with whom she was, presumably, sleeping), and although she was nine months gone, no one realised she was pregnant!

The Beale case was the subject of a TV documentary, *Caroline's Baby*. (32) Caroline Beale is a woman of average build, or perhaps slightly less than average; it beggars belief that she could have been carrying a normal sized baby to full term without anyone realising, but that was indeed the case. (33) An expert witness who appeared in the documentary (34) said that about one pregnancy in five hundred goes unnoticed. This may be statistically infrequent, but in view of the millions of babies born in the world every year, one can hardly call it a rare phenomenon. (35)

On a totally unrelated note, in 1990, when the current writer was attending a political conference in Blackpool, he saw a notice outside a fortune teller's

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

booth. It read "Closed. Due to unforeseen circumstances?" (36) This is an old joke; I remember seeing it in print at least once prior to this, although I'm damned if I can remember where.

So, next time you read a seemingly unbelievable story in the gutter press, or even a much recycled urban legend you've heard many times before, stop and ask yourself if you're really being had, or has the remarkable happened and the legend come to life?

Notes And References

(1) I summarised this as law three of *Baron's Laws*; to wit:

Rule 1) **THE LAW OF VESTED INTEREST: EVERYBODY ALWAYS HAS AN ULTERIOR MOTIVE.**

Rule 2) **THE PSYCHIC'S LAW OF CHUTZPAH: THE ABILITY OF A PSYCHIC TO MANIFEST PSI PHENOMENA UNDER LABORATORY CONDITIONS IS DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL TO THE STRENGTH OF BELIEF OF THE EXPERIMENTER AND INVERSELY PROPORTIONAL TO THE STRENGTH OF CONTROLS.**

Rule 3) **NATURE IS IMMUTABLE; HUMAN NATURE IS CAPRICIOUS.**

I do not claim to have devised any of these, well, possibly the first, sort of.

(2) Two disparate examples will suffice: The *Daily Mail* for February 21, 1992, page 5, reported the case of a 25 year old woman who had accused a taxi driver of raping her twice. It transpired that she had made at least five false accusations of rape. This followed the case of a woman of 22 who was raped in a taxi the previous Monday; later the driver was charged with her rape.

The *Independent* for October 31, 1991, reported on its front page the quashing of two rape convictions and one conviction for indecent assault against a man who had spent 10 years in jail. There was no suggestion in this case that the incidents had not occurred, but the mishandling of forensic evidence and misidentification by the obviously terrified victims led to an enormous miscarriage of justice. One has to look for them, but both wrongful rape convictions and totally false allegations are by no means uncommon.

(3) The so-called Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal claimed this, but he was put to shame by one Clare Roskill who wrote an article on so-called anti-Semitism for the social(ist?) workers' magazine *Community Care*. The article *ECHOES OF THE HOLOCAUST*, which appeared in the April 14, 1994 issue saw the author claiming that she (he?) had lost 217 members of her family in the Holocaust on her maternal grandmother's side alone. I have a distinct feeling that, unlike Oscar Wilde, Ms Roskill wasn't being earnest.

(4) More than four years on I am not sure I would even recognise Mrs Polge or Mr Landis, but by the same token I won't be the slightest bit impressed if I see this sort of direct hit again. Not that I was the first time.

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

(5) News report (heard by the author) on LBC Radio, May 13, 1992.

(6) If my memory serves me correctly, this was in a news report broadcast on a local or national radio programme sometime in 1990. Later that year I attended her fringe meeting at the Conservative Party conference and tried to raise the subject with her personally. Again, if my memory serves me correctly, she shifted ground quoting some - possibly non-existent - United Nations report which claimed that up to a million children a year had been engaged in making porn films, or something like that. At this same meeting - and I remember this well - a video interview was shown of the American serial killer Ted Bundy. It was taken shortly before his well deserved execution, and in it, Bundy said that he didn't want to make excuses for his crimes, but that he had been exposed to pornography at an early age, and said, or indicated, that this might have been a factor in his degeneration into a human fiend, (though not of course in so many words). Mrs Whitehouse seemed to think that Bundy's alleged exposure to porn as a child was extremely significant. Personally I felt it was much more significant that he had been raised in a good Christian home.

(7) *IN PURSUIT OF SATAN: THE POLICE AND THE OCCULT*, by Robert D. Hicks, published by Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York, (1991), page 56.

(8) *HOW SATAN SOLD HIS STORY TO THE POPS*, by Nick Anning, published in the *Journalist*, December 1991/January 1992, page 5. True believer Dianne Core was quoted thus in this article: "Four thousand babies are being sacrificed to Satan every year in Britain..." Mrs Core's 1991 book *Chasing Satan* has to be read to be believed, or rather, not believed.

(9) The following table and is extracted from the current writer's pamphlet *The Doll's House*, published by InfoText Manuscripts, London, (1993).

Alleged Deaths Per Annum	Source	Date
50,000	<i>Gloucester Echo</i>	8th February, 1983
95,000	<i>The Journal</i> (Newcastle)	4th January, 1984
50,000	<i>The News</i> (Portsmouth)	28th February, 1984
100,000	<i>Daily Express</i>	11th March, 1987
110,000	<i>The Times</i>	21st February, 1991
150,000	<i>The Times</i>	27th August, 1991
100,000	<i>The Scotsman</i>	31st January, 1992

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

111,000
111,000

The Daily Telegraph
1993 NNSD Fact File

4th February, 1992
1993

The distinguished psychologist Hans Eysenck has written of such statistics that they are "extrapolations from epidemiological figures....and have no scientific meaning of any kind."

(10) Shades of Mary Whitehouse?

(11) May 31, 1995. For the record I recorded all these incidents at the time when they were still fresh in my mind. If I recall, I started writing this article some time in 1992. I didn't expect subsequently to be able to augment it, at least, not to this extent.

(12) Actually two summonses in connection with two libel actions I had brought against the publisher of a scurrilous magazine.

(13) I ran into the same barrister at the High Court on October 11, 1995.

(14) When he walked in, I was preparing my affidavit and he quipped sarcastically: "Are you swearing on the *Torah*?" To be precise, as a lifelong atheist I don't swear but affirm my affidavits.

(15) *Lady Luck: The Theory of Probability*, by Warren Weaver, Dover Edition 1982 - first published 1964.

(16) These figures presuppose the idea that people are just as likely to be born on one day as another (leap years excepted). This is not necessarily true of course; the birth of a child is not generally an arbitrary occurrence.

(17) For the record, I once knew a man named James Smith; and more than five decades after this murder, another boxer named James "Bonecrusher" Smith would go on to become heavyweight champion of the world. So what?

(18) *The New Murderers' Who's Who* by J.H.H. Gaute and Robin Odell, published by Headline, (1989), pages 360-1.

(19) There are two journalists named Duncan Campbell and, as I know from my own experiences, two by the name of Matthew Kallman and two women named Jill Dick active in British publishing, one of them an author/journalist.

(20) Later it turned out that he was a local window cleaner.

(21) I believe the word is actually *commère*.

(22) The numbers 1, 2, 3 & 4 also occur much more frequently than the numbers 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 in so called random numbers. The proof of this lies way beyond the scope of this article, but for those interested in pursuing it, the

SKEPTICANA: TEN SKEPTICAL ESSAYS

1964 study by Warren Weaver, *LADY LUCK: The Theory of Probability*, is an excellent place to start.

(23) This article was actually written over a period of several months.

(24) "I believe because it is absurd." - Tertullian, (c160-c225).

(25) History is full of plausible but improbable liars.

(26) Typhoid Mary was not a wilful spreader of the disease.

(27) *Public Eye: Sex in the Dark*.

(28) Probably more than two men, I didn't see the whole programme.

(29) *Town in HIV storm*, published in the *Times*, September 12, 1995, page 2.

For the non-academically-minded, I have used the London *Times* throughout this publication because this is a de facto semi-official publication which is indexed and held by libraries throughout the English-speaking world.

(30) The *Guardian*, September 14, 1995; the story appears on pages 1 & 2.

(31) The *Guardian*, September 15, 1995, page 2.

(32) This was shown originally in 1995 and an updated version was screened on January 30, 1996.

(33) This case is extremely complicated but to cut a long story short, Beale had recently lost a close friend who had died tragically from cancer. She had managed to convince herself that the baby was dead - out of some sort of bizarre sympathetic reaction for her deceased friend.

(34) Ian Brockington, Professor of Psychiatry at Birmingham University.

(35) Beale gave birth to her tragic child in the bath at her hotel shortly before she and her friends were due to return home. She is alleged to have drowned the baby deliberately. This may well also be true, and the claim by the stone-hearted female district attorney that Beale had acted in a cold, calculating and cunning manner and had known exactly what she was doing may well be true, but her lawyer Michael Dowd argued far more convincingly that however rational her actions may have appeared to be, and however well practised were her various acts of deceit, the very fact that she did what she did spells crazy in anybody's language.

Beale returned to Britain on March 8, 1996 after accepting a plea bargain; part of the terms of her release was that she should be sent to a psychiatric hospital.

(36) This may not be the actual punctuation, but I distinctly recall the question mark.

Published by InfoText Manuscripts,

**93c Venner Road,
Sydenham,
London SE26 5HU.
England.**

ISBN 1 871473 09 8